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Media Strategies Used by Junior Members of Congress

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This study examines the media strategies used by junior members of Congress. The data are drawn from a survey of staff members working for junior members of the House of Representatives. The results are compared to an earlier study (Kedrowski 1996). I find that while junior members are unlikely to use the national media as a legislative strategy, they are not hostile to this tactic. The results differ from findings of the earlier study, but are not inconsistent with them. I speculate that junior members are unlikely to pursue the national media because of their lack of credibility on policy issues and their emphasis on local constituency orientation. As they become more electorally secure, and gain institutional credibility, I speculate that junior members will become more receptive to using the national media in their legislative efforts.

In the last several years, scholars have begun to turn their attention to a long-neglected area of study: the relationship between the media and Congress. Many of the studies focus

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on the largely local orientation of individual members of Congress. The primary goal of members and press secretaries alike is to get members covered in the local news in order to enhance their chances for reelection (Bagdikian 1974; Bruce and Downs n.d.; Cook 1989; Hess 1991). Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that some members of Congress also use the media for policy purposes. As early as the 1950s, Donald Matthews described senators' use the Washington media for information about developments on the Hill (1973). In *Making Laws and Making News*, Timothy Cook examined the members' use of media to call attention to legislation (1989). Hedrick Smith cited similar examples in *The Power Game* (1988). Loomis (1988) included the media in his analysis of the "new American politician," and Stephen Hess discusses the "lordly op. ed.," editorials written by members of Congress that appear in major newspapers for the purpose of "influencing policy" (1991).

In an earlier work, I examined the "media enterprise": a set of activities that members of Congress use to communicate within the Washington community (Kedrowski 1996). The immediate goal of the media enterprise is legislative. These legislative activities are completely different from members' efforts to communicate with constituents in the district, although the two may have the same genesis. Legislative media activities may include interviews on television public affairs programs, news conferences or floor statements designed to catch reporters' attention, courting favor with influential columnists or publishing op. ed. articles in the *Washington Post*. The intended audience for these efforts is policy makers and their advisors, principally other members of the media, interest groups, and the public.

Not all members are equally likely to use the media enterprise. Instead, the initial study of members' use of the media found a cadre of members, approximately one-fourth to one-half of the membership of Congress, who are likely to see the media

as a policy tool. Not only were these "media entrepreneurs" more likely to seek national media attention for their legislative initiatives, they were also greater news consumers. In other words, these members were more likely to be reached by others' media efforts.

The initial study also found some demographic differences between the media entrepreneurs and their colleagues. One difference was that junior members were more likely to become media entrepreneurs than were more senior members. This finding is the basis for the study reported here. Given the high levels of turnover in the Congress in recent years, I wish to see if this trend still holds. I examine members of Congress first elected in the 103rd Congress to see if they are more likely to become media entrepreneurs than their more senior counterparts.

METHODOLOGY

The original study was conducted during 1991 and 1992, during the 102nd Congress. A methodology that combined four legislative case studies and a survey of all congressional offices was used. During the 1992 election cycle, 110 members were first elected to Congress. Such a large freshmen class was highly unusual. The "Class of 1992" was larger than any freshman class since the famous "Class of 1974" (*CQ Almanac 1992*). While the 1994 midterm elections brought additional changes to the U.S. Congress, including Republican control of both houses, 91 members of the Class of 1992 (83%) were reelected to their positions in the House (*CQ Almanac 1992*; *Congress at a Glance).*

The high rate of turnover in 1992 provides an opportunity to determine whether junior members share the same attitudes toward the media as their more senior counterparts. This study was conducted during the waning weeks of the 103rd Congress and the first months of the 104th Congress. All members of the House of Representatives who were first elected to Congress in special

elections in 1991 and 1992, or in the 1992 general election were contacted.[1] The same survey instrument was used in the initial study, allowing direct comparison between the studies. The survey was administered in two parts. Survey instruments were first mailed in October 1994. To increase the response rate, surveys were mailed again in November 1994 to offices that had not responded. Telephone interviews were conducted during June and July 1995. Attempts were made to contact a total of 102 members. A few offices refused to participate, citing office policy against survey participation. With other offices, I was unable to complete a survey, despite repeated efforts. The mail responses and the telephone responses to the survey yielded 38 completed surveys, a response rate of 37%. The response rate compares favorably with the response rates of similar studies (Bruce and Downs n.d.; Cook 1989; Kedrowski, 1996)

As in the original study, administrative assistants or press secretaries were contacted. They were asked to speak on behalf of the members and to reflect upon their office's media strategy. Of course, contacting surrogates is not the same as talking with members themselves. However, the use of surrogates is at once practical and valid for several reasons. First, Congressional offices are much like small businesses, employing over a dozen staff members who work on behalf of the member, and speak and act in the member's name. Second, the demands on members' time are so great that members themselves will rarely, if ever, complete surveys mailed to their offices. At best, they may consent to an occasional personal interview. Studies such as this one are certain to be completed by staff members, even when the correspondence is directed to the members. Third, Hill staffers understand that their livelihoods depend on being able to "speak in

[1]The original study included both members of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Because of the relatively small number of Senators who were newly elected during this period (18), the Senate was omitted in this research.

their master's voice." If they cannot represent their member's positions accurately, staffers will quickly find themselves unemployed.

The greatest potential for bias may be which office staff member completed the interview. Press secretaries and administrative assistants have different jobs. Press secretaries relate to the media on a daily basis, and have a strong local orientation (Bruce and Downs n.d.; Cook 1989; Hess 1991). The administrative assistant oversees all operations within a congressional office, but does not focus exclusively on the media. However, the original study included respondents that were press secretaries and administrative assistants, and showed that there was no difference in tone between the two types of surveys.

Demographic Analysis

Table I presents the demographic breakdown of the respondents and non-respondents. The figures in the table show that respondents mirror the non-respondents in all demographic variables, with two exceptions. The first exception is region. Over half of the respondents represented districts in the south or southwest, while less than one-third of the nonrespondents represented districts in the south or southwest. Two factors could account for this disparity. First, my university is located in the south, which may have stimulated more interest among respondents from the region. Second, the mail survey included a letter of endorsement from the member of Congress who represents the district in which the university is located. His endorsement may have carried more weight with Southern members than with persons from other regions. Since the first study found that Southern members were less likely to be "media entrepreneurs," the importance that junior members attach to the media enterprise may be understated by these findings. However, the skewed nature of these data is mitigated by the fact that the

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISON OF RESPONDENTS AND NON-RESPONDENTS
(percents and averages)

Variable		Respondents		Non-Respondents	
		Percent	N	Percent	N
Gender					
	Male	74	28	83	53
	Female	26	10	17	11
Party					
	Democrat	37	14	50	32
	Republican	63	24	50	32
Race					
	White	74	28	77	49
	Black	21	8	14	9
Region‡†					
	South/Southwest*	60	23	31	44
	Non-South	40	15	68	20
Committee Chair?†					
	Yes	0	0	0	0
	No	100	38	100	64
Sub-Committee Chair?†					
	Yes	8	3	22	14
	No	92	35	78	50
Party Leader?					
	Yes	3	37	0	0
	No	97	1	100	0
		Average		**Average**	
Age+	Years	50.8	na	47.2	na
Tenure§	Years	1.9	na	2.1	na
Ideology	ADA Score	50.4	na	43.8	na

*Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia.

†Includes both chair and ranking member.

+$p \leq 0.05$.

‡ $p \leq 0.01$.

§ $p \leq 0.001$.

respondents do not differ from nonrespondents in terms of other important variables.

Second, as Table 1 reports, difference of means tests show that the junior members whose offices responded to the survey have served a slightly shorter period of time in Congress than the those who did not respond—1.9 years compared to 2.1 years. The difference is statistically significant, but it is not substantively important. Likewise, the members' ages differed slightly. Members whose offices responded were slightly older than the members whose offices did not respond, 47.2 years compared to 50.8 years. Again, the difference is not substantively important.

Junior Respondents vs. Original Survey

As Table 2 shows, the junior members whose offices responded to the survey are different from the members represented in the original study. For example, the junior members have a higher percentage of women (21% to only 5%) and minorities (26% to 6%), are more likely to be from the south or southwest (60% to 40%), are about 4 years younger (50.8 years old compared to 54.8), are less likely to chair or full committees (88% to 0%) or subcommittees (52% to 8%), and (obviously) have served a shorter period of time (almost 10 years shorter). Many of these differences are easily explained. Record numbers of women and minorities were elected in 1992: 47 women, 38 African-Americans and 17 Hispanics were sworn into the 103rd Congress (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994). Similarly, by definition, junior members will have served a shorter period of time than their counterparts in the original survey. Since the Congress is governed by seniority, it also makes sense that few (if any) of the junior members represented in the second survey would chair full committees or subcommittees.

TABLE 2
DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISON OF ORIGINAL RESPONDENTS AND JUNIOR MEMBERS
(percents and averages)

Variable		Original Respondents		Junior Members	
		Percent	N	Percent	N
Gender‡					
	Male	94	140	74	28
	Female	6	9	26	10
Party					
	Democrat	91	58	37	14
	Republican	39	91	63	24
Race+					
	White	94	140	74	28
	Black	5	7	21	8
	Other	2	2	5	2
Region‡					
	South/Southwest	40	59	60	23
	Non-South	61	90	40	15
Committee Chair?†§					
	Yes	88	131	0	0
	No	12	18	100	38
Sub-Committee Chair?§					
	Yes	52	78	8	3
	No	48	71	92	35
Party Leader?					
	Yes	2	146	3	1
	No	98	3	97	37
		Average		**Average**	
Age+	Years	54.8	na	5.8	na
Tenure§	Years	11.6	na	1.9	na
Ideology	ADA Score	49.9	na	50.4	na

*Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia.

†Includes both chair and ranking member.

+$p \leq 0.05$.

‡$p \leq 0.01$.

§$p \leq 0.001$.

What is *not* significantly different between the first and second surveys—ideology, party, and position in the party leadership—is more important for this analysis. Ideology and party say much about members' likely voting habits and other predispositions (Hinkley 1988); party leaders play a unique role in use of the media. By virtue of their position, leaders are far more likely to be in the media spotlight (Cook 1989; Peters 1990; Scheele 1989). However, since there are few or no leaders in either group of respondents, any differences in attitude toward the media cannot be attributed to the presence of leaders in one set of respondents and their absence in another. Last, the four-year difference in average age is also not substantively important, even if it is statistically significant.

RESULTS

In the original study, media entrepreneurs were defined using a variable to measure the respondent's attitude toward using media strategies. The "attitude" variable was constructed by averaging the respondents' answers to four survey questions. The respondents were asked to indicate if they "strongly agree," "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," "strong disagree" or "don't know" to the following statements:

> 1. Members of Congress—in both the House and the Senate—often solicit media exposure (i.e. interviews, talk show appearances, op. eds., press releases, etc.) as a way to stimulate discussion about national policy proposals in Washington.
>
> 2. Soliciting media exposure is not a particularly effective way to put an issue on the congressional agenda.

3. Media exposure is an effective way to convince other legislators in both chambers to support policy proposals.

4. Media exposure is an effective way to stimulate discussion on policy alternatives and issues among executive branch officials.

Each question had five possible responses, ranging from "strongly disagree" (assigned a value of 1) to "strongly agree" (assigned a value of 5). These responses were then averaged. Three definitions of "media entrepreneur" are used. Those respondents with a score on the attitude variable of 4.0 or higher are called "the pool of media entrepreneurs." Those with a score on the attitude variable of 4.25 or higher are called "likely media entrepreneurs," and respondents with a score on the attitude variable of 4.50 or higher are called "hard-core media entrepreneurs."

As Table 3 reports, respondents to the second survey had significantly lower values on the attitude variable. No respondent in this new group reached the cut-off for "pool of media entrepreneurs," the lowest threshold. Yet, as the figures in Table 3 show, a difference of means test indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the *aggregate* responses of both groups of respondents. At first glance, it appears that junior members may not be as enthusiastic about using the media as some of their predecessors. But by the same token, they are no more hostile to the media enterprise than their predecessors. In fact, they appear to reflect the most typical attitudes of members of Congress.

Intended Audience

Respondents in the second survey hold many of the same opinions about the purpose and effectiveness of the media enterprise as the respondents in the original study. For example, both

sets of respondents agreed that members of Congress use op. eds. and interviews with the national media to reach constituents, the public at large, and other media. They also agreed that members did *not* pursue these strategies to reach congressional colleagues, party leaders, or congressional staff.

TABLE 3

ATTITUDE SCALE FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION: ORIGINAL STUDY AND JUNIOR MEMBERS

ATTITUDE SCALE VALUE	Original Respondents		Junior Members	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
1.75	0.7	1	0.0	0
2.00	2.0	4	0.0	0
2.25	3.3	5	0.0	0
2.50	3.3	5	2.9	1
2.75	2.6	4	8.8	3
3.00	4.6	7	0.0	0
3.25	11.3	14	29.4	10
3.50	7.9	12	20.6	7
3.75	10.6	16	11.8	4
4.00	25.2	38	0.0	0
4.25	13.9	21	0.0	0
4.50	6.6	10	0.0	0
4.75	2.6	4	0.0	0
5.00	4.6	7	0.0	0
5.25	0.7	1	0.0	0
Total	100.0	151	100.0	34
	Attitude Scale Means*			
	Mean	N	Mean	N
	3.3	151	3.3	34

*$p = 0.73$.

There was only one statistically significant difference between the two groups: spokespersons for junior members considered media strategies as a more effective tool to reach officials in federal agencies than the respondents in the original survey.

The results reinforce one of original study's findings. Respondents in both studies agreed that *the media* were an important audience for the media enterprise. Getting coverage in the national media, or a well-placed op.ed. are important ways for members to gain credibility on an issue. National media coverage stimulates more national media coverage. In time, national prominence on an issue helps establish one as a "player" on a policy issue, and to gain access to the back rooms where the heavy-duty legislative negotiation occurs.

The finding that junior members may see the media enterprise as a more effective means to reach federal bureaucrats is also interesting. It suggests that junior members see uses for the media that transcend simply reaching the folks back home—and that junior members may not have the ability to reach federal agency officials that more senior members, with a subcommittee or a full committee chairmanship, may have.

Media and the Legislative Process

Similarly, respondents representing junior members, agree, for the most part, with respondents in the original study on when to use the media enterprise. The figures in Table 4 demonstrate that both sets of respondents indicate that using the media was most effective in setting the national agenda (an average of 3.9 for the original respondents and 4.1 for the junior members) or in framing the terms of debate (averages of 3.7 and 3.9). They agreed that the media enterprise was the least useful in influencing federal agencies (averages of 3.0 for the original respondents and 3.1 for junior members), or in moving a bill through committee (the average for both groups is 2.6). In both cases, these results reflect the realities of congressional and bureaucratic politics.

There are two instances where the new survey respondents appear to be more receptive to using the media enterprise than

TABLE 4
USING THE MEDIA: INTENDED AUDIENCE & STAGE OF LEGISLATIVE PROCESS
(Data based on Likert Scale: 1 = very infrequently to 5= very frequently)

	Original Respondents		Junior Members	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Who are legislators trying to reach?				
Constituents	3.9	1	4.2	1
Interest Groups	3.4	2	3.2	6
Public other than constituents	3.4	3	3.5	3
Other media	3.4	4	3.5	2
White House	3.1	5	3.4	4
Colleagues in own party	3.0	6	2.8	9
Party leadership	3.0	7	3.0	7
Federal agencies	2.8	8	3.2	5
Colleagues in other party	2.6	9	3.0	8
Academic "think tanks"	2.6	10	2.3	10
Congressional Staff	2.2	11	2.0	11
When do members solicit media attention for policy proposals?				
Place an issue on national agenda	3.9	1	4.1	1
Frame the terms of debate	3.7	2	3.9	2
Respond to White House proposals	3.4	3	3.5*	3
Respond to decisions and proposals from federal agencies	3.0	5	3.1	7
Find support for floor vote	3.0	6	3.4*	4
Move a bill through committee	2.6	7	2.6	8
Solicit support in the other chamber	2.3	8	3.2+	6

*$p \geq 0.05$

+$p \geq 0.001$

the respondents in the original survey: to gain support for a floor vote and to gain support in the other chamber In each case, spokespersons for junior members see uses for the media enterprise later in the legislative process. This result is consistent with my original assumption, that the media would become more important to members with increased tenure. The result also reflects the changing nature of Congress, which is becoming more diffuse and depersonalized.

Generating Support in Congress

When queried about the relative effectiveness of various techniques to generate support in Congress, the respondents in the new study again show high levels of agreement with the respondents in the original survey. The results are presented in Table 5. Both groups rank personal contacts, constituent support, and support from the party leadership as important means to get support within Congress. Similarly, both groups consider contacts from federal agencies and political action committee support the least effective means to get support in Congress.

All the media strategies—television interviews, op. eds. articles and news releases—are relatively *more* important to respondents representing junior members. In the case of television interviews and op. ed. Articles, the differences are statistically significant. Again, it appears as though the media may be a more important legislative tool for the newer members, as initially indicated in the original study.

Building Coalitions Washington

The purpose of the media enterprise is to help influence public policy. Public policy may be made in any number of ways: by Congress, by the President, or by the bureaucracy. In all cases, it is in any policy maker's interest to build coalitions within the Washington community, in addition to legislative coalitions in Congress. To that end, both groups of respondents were asked

TABLE 5
EFFECTIVENESS OF LEGISLATIVE STRATEGIES WITHIN AND WITHOUT OF CONGRESS
(Data based on Likert Scale: 1 = very infrequently to 5= very frequently)

	Original Respondents		Junior Members	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
How effective are the following approaches in generating support within Congress?				
Personal Contacts	4.7	1	4.6	1
Constituent Support	4.1	2	4.1	2
Party Leadership	3.9	3	4.0	3
Interest Group Support	3.6	4	3.6	4
Contacts from White House	3.2	5	3.0	8
Opinion-Editorial Articles	2.9	6	3.2	7
News Articles	2.9	7	3.5*	5
Television Interviews	2.8	8	3.3*	6
Contacts from Federal Agencies	2.7	9	2.9	9
PAC Support	2.7	10	2.9	10
How effective are the following approaches in generating support inside Washington but outside Congress?				
Personal Contacts	4.4	1	4.3	1
Party Leadership	3.6	2	3.7	2
Grassroots Support	3.5	3	3.5	4
Contacts from White House	3.5	4	3.3	7
Opinion-Editorial Articles	3.4	5	3.4	6
Television Interviews	3.3	6	3.7*	3
News Articles	3.0	7	3.5*	5
Interest Group/PAC Support	2.8	8	3.1	8
Contacts from federal agencies	2.7	9	3.0	9

*$p \geq 0.001$.

about the relative effectiveness of various strategies to build coalitions in the Washington community. Respondents in both surveys ranked personal contacts, support of the party leadership, and grassroots pressure as among the most effective strategies to build support in the Washington community. These results, of course, mirror the strategies found most effective for building coalitions in Congress.

Respondents speaking on behalf of junior members consider media strategies to be more effective than those respondents in the original study. Respondents representing junior members consider television interviews and news articles to be relatively more effective than did respondents in the original survey.[2] Again, these findings seem to support my original contention that media strategies will become more important over time and with newer members of Congress.

DISCUSSION

The results appear to be contradictory at first glance. On the one hand, none of the offices of junior members included in this survey met the criteria of "media entrepreneurs," as defined in the original study. On the other hand, there is evidence that junior members do consider the media enterprise a more useful tool for building legislative coalitions and coalitions in the Washington community than their predecessors. What might account for these differences? If the media seem to be, relatively speaking, more important to junior members, how come they do not demonstrate more entrepreneur-like behavior? These data do not al-

[2]The first survey asked about "news and articles and press releases" as one combined item. The second survey asked about news articles and press releases separately. The respondents representing junior members ranked press releases as much less effective than news articles. The language difference may account for some of the difference in the results. Nonetheless, the finding is consistent with those from other questions across the survey that use identical language.

low a definitive answer this question. There are, however, two possible explanations: the extremely local orientation of the local members and the importance of credibility in making the media enterprise work.

Local Orientation

It is well-established that members of Congress have an extremely local orientation, reflected in the activities all staff members. Press secretaries are no exception (Bruce and Downs n.d.; Cook, 1989). Moreover, congressional scholars have long discussed the importance of getting reelected in the minds of members of Congress (Fenno 1973; 1978; Mayhew 1974). Other goals, such as influence in the House or affecting public policy, come after members have solidified their electoral base through multiple elections, pork barrel spending in the district, and constituency service. Generally speaking, junior members are still at stage one: solidifying their electoral base. Most members spend their first term, if not their first several terms, ensuring that they will be returned to office. Considering the extraordinary levels of turn over experienced in the 103rd and 104th Congresses, doubtless this concern will remain at the forefront of new members' minds. The respondents echoed these sentiments. Typical of their sentiments are the following:

> [We] use the local media to reach the district. [We're] not too interested in reaching the D.C. area.
>
> [We] focus on our own district, a rural area that has unique needs. National media focuses on urban problems.
>
> Focus on the district [*sic*]; national media not high on the Congresswoman's list.

> It has to do with the member's personality. Rep. _____'s main concern is strictly local and what he can do for his constituents.

Credibility

Second, in the case studies which augmented the statistical analysis in the original study, I found that credibility is an important variable in terms of understanding exactly who was likely to use the media enterprise, and when they were most likely to try. Credibility is an important, if amorphous concept. Without being considered credible on an issue, any member who attempts to get media attention will be viewed skeptically, and in all likelihood, will be completely ignored by reporters and consumers of news alike. Chairing a full committee or subcommittee is a very good means of gaining credibility on the issues under the committee's jurisdiction. For members in the minority party, rising to the position of ranking member will also help one's stature. There are, of course, other ways to achieve credibility, such as specialization, or sponsoring legislation, to name two. Regardless of the means, credibility takes time to establish.

Moreover, chairing a full committee or a subcommittee provides members a "bully pulpit" that can be used to publicize favorite issues and the members, themselves. The chair controls the agenda, has the ability to hold hearings, conduct investigations, direct committee staff to research and draft legislation, and can use the chair's leverage to shepherd bills through the legislative process. Using a subcommittee or full committee in this way was a favorite tactic of media entrepreneurs.

Junior members have not had time to establish their credibility. They do not have a "bully pulpit" in the form of a full committee or subcommittee chairmanship. They have not been in office long enough to have established their expertise in other ways, such as through specialization or long-term interest in a

given issue. Therefore, one of the keys to making the media enterprise work successfully—credibility—is not yet available to junior members.

Again, these sentiments were echoed in the comments of our respondents. Take, for example, the following:

> Rep. _____ is not yet a national figure, so we use the local press.

> [Indicting that their efforts to use the national media were not successful]: Not very successful, mostly has to do with whether you are a minority party member with junior rank.

> A legislator should demonstrate a seriousness of purpose by either tackling a particularly difficult issue or becoming an expert on the issue, so that when it is "up," the press will turn to an "expert witness." (Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) on campaign finance reform was cited as an example.)

Simply because the junior members are not currently using the media enterprise does not mean that they are hostile to the concept. In fact, junior members place more stock in using media strategies to build legislative coalitions and coalitions in the Washington community. As junior members gain stature within this seniority-dominated institution, these members may begin to use the media enterprise more frequently. The fact that they see potential in using the media supports my earlier finding that, as Congress changes, the institution will become less insular, and concomitantly, the media will become more important.

While they may consider media strategies more important than did the respondents from just a few years ago, the new survey respondents are also realists. They place the media strategies within the political realities of Washington and the Congress. They understand the importance of personal contacts, the party

leadership and constituent and grassroots contacts. While Congress is certainly changing dramatically, much of the stuff of politics is personal. The media enterprise augments that, but does not replace it.

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